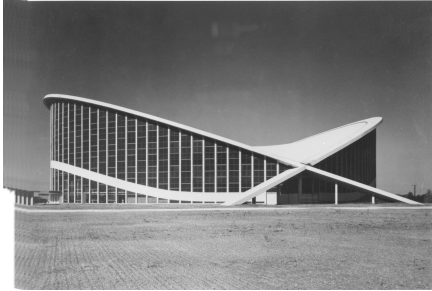


Inventions in North Carolina:

Dorton Arena

Series: Inventions in North Carolina



J.S. Dorton Arena. Photo credit: N.C. Museum of History

For more than fifty years J. S. Dorton Arena has been a symbol of the North Carolina State Fair. The arena was named for J. Sibley “Doc” Dorton, who served as fair manager from 1937 until his death in 1961. Dorton was responsible for getting this awesome building off the ground.

In 1937 Commissioner of Agriculture W. Kerr Scott (he later became governor) appointed Dorton manager of the State Fair. Dorton also managed the Cleveland County Fair, which he helped found in 1923. It soon grew so popular that people called it the “western State Fair.”

Dorton believed that the State Fair should pay for itself. Before the 1937 fair he invested \$7,500 in fairground improvements. His goal was to create a fair of the future, and he worked to improve and expand the fair. The citizens of the state flocked to the fair, and it made a profit of more than \$8,000 that year. The fair continued to make money, even though the Great Depression had hold of the country through the 1930s.

During the early 1940s Dorton began designing his dream fairgrounds. At the heart of his plan was a coliseum that could be used for livestock shows, conventions, and other events not just during the fair but year-round. Dorton wanted the building to show that North Carolina was a cool state. The General Assembly appropriated \$2 million for the structure in 1950, and Dorton went looking for an architect at N.C. State University.

Matthew Nowicki, head of the Department of Architecture at N.C. State, created the arena’s unusual design. Nowicki was killed in an airplane accident soon after he was hired as architect. His friend William Henley Deitrick, of Raleigh, finished the project with structural engineer Fred Severud and contractor William Muirhead Construction Company in 1952.

The arena was the first building in the world with a roof supported by cables. Two intersecting arches that lean away from one another form the saddle-shaped roof. Metal cables strung between the arches hold the roof, and the arches carry the roof’s weight. Because there are no columns supporting the roof, every seat in the arena has a clear view. The outer walls are made of tinted glass that reduces glare. The building holds

5,110 permanent seats. Twenty-five hundred portable seats can be added when a stage is used.

Dorton's building was first named the State Fair Arena. But because many livestock events took place there, fairgoers began calling it the livestock pavilion or the "Cow Palace." It was renamed J. S. Dorton Arena in 1961 after Dorton died.

Dorton Arena is a state landmark. It is also famous around the nation and the world. In 1973 it was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places. Doc Dorton would consider that a very cool honor for his awesome arena!